Art without beauty

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FEW things tell us more about a culture—what it esteems, what it disparages—than its art. The plays of Sophocles distill an essence of Periclean Athens just as the paintings of Titian bring us near to the heart of seventeenth-century Venetian culture. Closer to our own day, it is easy to see how Modernist art—with its dissonances and anxious novelties—epitomizes the giddy, Promethean ferment of the early twentieth century. Le Sacre du Printemps or The Wasteland could no more have been composed in 1850 than Les Demoiselles D’Avignon could have been painted then. Such works belong to and help define their time.

What, then, of contemporary culture? What does the art of the past few decades tell us about it—and about ourselves? Alas, anyone interested in understanding what is at stake in the “culture wars”—those many battles about values that, since the 1960s, have loomed increasingly large in American society—must ponder contemporary art. I say “alas” because the spectacle that the contemporary art world presents is distinctly
unappetizing. Whatever merits individual artists here and there may exhibit, most of the established art of our time is pretentiously banal when it is not downright pathological.

Celebrating the grotesque

These are, I know, harsh words. But they are not excessive. We live in a time when art is often indistinguishable from perversity. Everyone knows about the cases of Andres Serrano, with his photographs of crucifixes immersed in urine, and Robert Mapplethorpe, with his photographs of sexual torture and humiliation. And everyone knows, too, that work by these men was supported in part by public monies from the National Endowment for the Arts and other government bodies.

But such well-publicized cases are only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. For every Andres Serrano or Robert Mapplethorpe there are scores of other artists—celebrated and acclaimed ones, too—producing “work” that is equally repellent. It would be a simple matter to fill a book with examples: Karen Finley smearing herself with chocolate and denouncing the evils of patriarchy; Ron Athey, an HIV positive “performance artist,” who slices abstract designs into the flesh of another man and then mops up the blood with paper towels and suspends them above his audience on clotheslines; Carolee Schneemann, who slowly unravels a text from her vagina while reading it aloud to her audience; and on and on. As I say, it would be easy to produce a fat anthology of such grotesqueries.

But the problem is not, or not only, numbers. The real issue is not the existence but the widespread celebration of such images and behavior as art. As a society, we suffer today from a peculiar form of moral anesthesia. It is the delusion that, by calling something “art,” we thereby purchase for it a blanket exemption from moral criticism—as if something’s being art automatically rendered all moral considerations beside the point. A juror in the Mapplethorpe trial in Cincinnati memorably summed up this attitude. Acknowledging that he did not like Mapplethorpe’s rebarbative photographs, he nonetheless concluded that, “if people say it’s art, then I have to go along with it.”

It is worth pausing to digest that terrifying comment. It is also worth confronting it with a question: Why do so many
people feel that, if something is regarded as art, they "have to go along with it," no matter how offensive it might be? Part of the answer has to do with the confusion of art with "free speech." (More precisely, it has to do with the confusion of art with a debased idea of free speech that supposes any limits on expression are inimical to freedom. In fact, freedom without limits quickly degenerates into a parody of freedom.) Another part of the answer has to do with the evolution, and what we might call the institutionalization, of the avant-garde and its posture of defiance.

In any event, when we step back to consider the nature and significance of contemporary art, we are immediately struck by a number of peculiarities. Perhaps the foremost peculiarity is the negligible role that beauty plays in most contemporary art. This of course is nothing new. The eclipse of beauty in art dates back decades and has its roots even further back in certain forms of Romanticism. But the very familiarity of this situation makes it difficult to appreciate its essential oddness. After all, it was not so long ago that the end or goal of art was to produce beautiful objects. Today, the very ambition to produce beautiful works is, in many artistic quarters, otiose.

What does this tell us? To be sure, the question "Whatever happened to beauty?" immediately raises a separate but related question: "Whatever happened to the art world?" To that question, the brief answer—inadequate but not really inaccurate—is "Several very bad things." I will touch on a few of the things that I think are wrong with the contemporary art world. But I want also to issue a disclaimer. "The art world" is a sprawling, enigmatic, often self-contradictory phenomenon; like the dreaded Hydra of Greek mythology, it is many-headed. No sooner have you cut off one head than several more sprout in its place—each, it seems, more poisonous than the one it replaced. There has been plenty of astute criticism about particular developments in the art world. But no one, I think, has yet mastered Heracles' trick of slaying the beast outright.

The good old days?

Admittedly, it seems odd to talk about the art world in this way. In the normal course of events, one would think that the art world was the friend of art. After all, what else does that
vast network of museums, galleries, dealers, critics, publications, schools, foundations, patrons public and private exist for if not to support, elucidate, and enjoy the arts? What indeed. It may seem paradoxical, but the truth is that the art world today—with a few notable exceptions—has become one of the chief enemies of art. The real life of art today mostly takes place quite apart from the official purlieus of art-world galleries, museums, and so on. Paraphrasing what one of the characters in Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest* said of Lady Bracknell, the art world is a monster without being a myth.

In some ways, this feeling is not new. In the introduction to his book *The Development of Modern Art*, which was published in 1908, the great German critic Julius Meier-Graefe had many critical things to say about the art world of his day. He bemoaned the “extravagant prices” that works of art were fetching; the cliquishness and obtuseness of many collectors; and the ferocious commercialization of the whole process: “Sales are effected as on the Bourse,” Meier-Graefe wrote indignantly, “and speculation plays an important part in the operations.”

Nor was that all. What he called the “senseless immensity” of contemporary artistic output threatened to crowd out works of aesthetic quality with works of aggressive mediocrity; the way that art exhibitions were run encouraged the second-rate, the hackneyed, the merely fashionable: “The remnant of artistic sensibility that lingers in our age bids fair to be systematically crushed out by these exhibitions,” Meier-Graefe warned. The one shred of consolation that he found was the grim satisfaction of having encountered and lived through the worst: “We have, at least,” Meier-Graefe concluded, “the comfort of knowing we can sink no lower.” This, remember, was 1908: Little did he suspect what fuliginous depths the twentieth century was preparing!

You might think that Meier-Graefe’s gloomy diagnosis simply shows that critics have always been in the business of grumbling: that they are the Chicken Littles, as it were, of the cultural world, always warning that the sky is about to fall. Well, thank God for that, since such grumbling, whatever its excesses, has helped inoculate us—some of us, anyway—against innumerable follies.
It would be a mistake, however, to think that complaints such as the ones that Meier-Graefe voiced are a license for complacency. For the uncomfortable fact is that Meier-Graefe was right about everything except one detail: the depths to which it was possible to sink. The decades since 1908 have shown that it was possible to sink much, much lower than he could have ever imagined. Much as it might console us to think so, we are not dealing with a case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Things do change: But they do not always stay the same. In our day, the art world and the world of culture generally have changed, changed dramatically, and they have changed for the worse.

To be sure, part of what we are dealing with here is a process of acceleration: All the bad things that Meier-Graefe noted are still around; it’s just that there is a lot more of—well, everything. Commercialization? Why, Meier-Graefe didn’t know the half of it. Aesthetic apathy, the habit of using works of art as badges of social status? We have become world champions at that game. Meier-Graefe spoke about the “ever increasing disproportion between artists and those who impertinently call themselves such.” What would he think of Manhattan in the 1990s? Think about it: When was the last time you met a waiter or waitress under the age of 40 in New York who wasn’t “really” an actor-dancer-writer-artist-film-maker-opera-singer-performance-artist-media-star in the making? Granted, some tiny fraction of those waiters and waitresses might turn out to be important artists; anything is possible; but the point is that there are more self-proclaimed artists per square inch in Manhattan today than there have been artists anywhere ever before in history. Should we be happy about this? Is it a sign of cultural health? Some people think so. But then some people think that Jasper Johns is a great artist. There just is no foolish thing that some people, given the right kinds of encouragement, won’t believe, or at least profess to believe.

**The avant-garde’s rise and fall**

In any event, the many differences to be observed between the art world then and now are not all the product of numbers; if the art world today seems in some respects like the art world Meier-Graefe describes only more so, there are other
aspects of the contemporary scene that have no real precedent. One important difference involves what I called the *institutionalization* of the avant-garde: that is, the process by which the late nineteenth and early twentieth century artistic avant-garde gradually became incorporated into establishment culture—indeed, *became* the establishment culture.

This is itself a long and complex story. In the 1930s, the French critic Albert Thibaudet summarized some of its chief features in his reflections on the Symbolist movement in literature. Thibaudet noted that Symbolism "accustomed literature to the idea of indefinite revolution" and inaugurated a "new climate" in French literature, a climate characterized by "the chronic avant-gardism of poetry, the 'What's new?' of the 'informed' public, ... the proliferation of schools and manifestos," and the ambition "to occupy that extreme point, to attain for an hour that crest of the wave in a tossed sea." "The Symbolist revolution," Thibaudet concluded, "might perhaps have been definitively the last, because it incorporated the theme of chronic revolution into the normal condition of literature."

Commenting on this passage in his 1972 essay "The Age of the Avant-Garde," Hilton Kramer observed that:

the "new climate" of 1885 has indeed become the "normal condition" of a good deal more than literature. It has become the basis of our entire cultural life. Thibaudet's "What's new?" is no longer the exclusive possession of a tiny "informed" public. It is now the daily concern of vast bureaucratic enterprises whose prosperity depends on keeping the question supplied with a steady flow of compelling but perishable answers.

The problem, as Kramer notes, is that the avant-garde has become a casualty of its own success. Having won battle after battle, it gradually transformed a recalcitrant bourgeois culture into a willing collaborator in its raids on established taste. But in this victory were the seeds of its own irrelevance, for, without credible resistance, its oppositional gestures degenerated into a kind of aesthetic buffoonery. In this sense, the institutionalization of the avant-garde—what Clement Greenberg called "avant-gardism"—spells the death or, at least, the senility of the avant-garde.

Born as a child of Romanticism, the artistic avant-garde developed in a heady atmosphere of new-found freedom. Op-
position was its lifeblood—opposition to a philistine cultural establishment, a hypocritical moralism, a trivializing artistic legacy. The shorthand term for all these evils was "bourgeois," and, as everyone knows, the history of the avant-garde contains a running commentary of execration against the stupidities and spiritual callousness of everything bourgeois.

The problem is that, while avant-garde culture requires bourgeois culture in order to appear avant-garde, bourgeois culture has shown itself to be only too willing to accommodate whatever provocations the avant-garde has been able to contrive. The last time establishment taste—that is, bourgeois taste—mustered anything like effective resistance to an avant-garde movement was in the late forties and early fifties when Abstract Expressionism first entered popular consciousness. After Jackson Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists were enfranchised as modern masters by important critics, galleries, and museums, bourgeois resistance to the avant-garde rapidly collapsed and, indeed, developed into a kind of unhealthy craving. The triumph of Pop Art a few years later not only confirms the truth of P. T. Barnum's observation that "there's a sucker born every minute," it also illustrates the extent to which avant-garde culture, far from opposing the establishment, had become the establishment.

It may seem ironical that the triumph of the avant-garde should also mark its death, but so it goes with movements that are essentially oppositional. Without a vigorous tradition to oppose, the avant-garde declines into a series of narcissistic soliloquies, raging against an illusory enemy that is only too happy to subsidize its tantrums. In fact, we are living today in the aftermath of the avant-garde, a time when its gestures have become ubiquitous but also aesthetically impotent. The obsession with novelty; the addiction to extreme gestures; the desire to marry art and radical politics: These common features of avant-garde culture live on now as a species of caricature. The scene is all too familiar: black-tie dinners at major museums, everyone important in attendance, celebrating the latest art-world freak—maybe it's Damien Hirst with his animal carcasses packed into glass tanks of formaldehyde; maybe it's the Chapman brothers with their pubescent female mannequins festooned with erect penises; maybe it's Mike Kelley with his mutilated dolls or Jeff Koons with his pornographic
sculptures of him and his former wife having sex or Cindy Sherman with her narcissistic feminism or Jenny Holzer with her political slogans. The list, obviously, is endless. And so is the tedium. Today, in the art world, anything goes but almost nothing happens.

As with any collusion of snobbery and artistic nullity, such spectacles have their amusing aspects. Tom Wolfe has made something of a career chronicling such events. In the end, though, the aftermath of the avant-garde has been a cultural disaster. For one thing, by universalizing the spirit of opposition, it has threatened to transform the practice of art into a purely negative enterprise. In large precincts of the art world today, art is oppositional or it is nothing. “Challenging” is one of the highest terms of praise that can be bestowed on art today; “transgressive” denotes an even higher register of enthusiasm.

Revolt against Victorianism

Now this, I submit, is a very odd state of affairs. Of course, it doesn’t seem odd because it is all around us: Every second grant application to the National Endowment for the Arts is about something “challenging” or “transgressive.” A trip to the galleries in TriBeCa or to the Whitney Museum is as predictably “transgressive” as painting-by-number. As I write, the Whitney is exhibiting a retrospective of the work of an artist who videotaped himself hacking pianos to pieces and nailing marshmallows to wood panels. A press release from the Yale Center for British Art dated February 1, 1997 celebrates a “major new acquisition by Damien Hirst,” to wit, In and Out of Love, which consists of “eight five-foot-square paintings with butterflies attached to them, four white boxes with circular holes, and an industrial-type table with four ash trays filled with cigarette butts.” With a straight face, the author of the press release informs us that “the work creates its own environment—a strange and uneasy mixture of the lyrical and the disgusting.” And this, you understand is meant as praise. When it comes to art today, the rule seems to be: When in doubt, just add bodily fluids or waste products. It’s almost as if we believe art must be unpleasant to be good—the more unpleasant the better.
Again, the story of how this came to pass is long and complex. In part, it is an expression of what the Australian philosopher David Stove referred to, in a different context, as the *horror victorianorum*—a horror of Victorian things, where "Victorian" specifies more a metaphysical than a chronological category. It stands for unremitting earnestness, idealism, moral uplift, sentimentality. Bloomsbury, though it cultivated its own species of repellent sentimentality, represents an early summit of this kind of instinctual revulsion.

Not that Bloomsbury had a monopoly on renunciation. Modernism generally represented an effort to respond to the crisis of a tradition rendered spiritually mute and unnourishing. In this respect, anyway, Wassily Kandinsky provides a typical example. In his essay "On the Question of Form," from 1912, Kandinsky wrote that the traditional understanding of beauty, as a harmony of form and content, had become stale, offering the spirit "no new food." The solution, he thought, was for art to split and pursue two radically different courses. He thus predicted the advent of "a great abstraction," which would reduce representational elements to a minimum in order to reveal purely formal harmonies, and a "great realism," which would dispense as far as possible with formal concerns in order to present objects just as they are, unencumbered by any preconceptions. Not surprisingly, he saw himself as the apostle of the movement for abstraction; it perhaps tells us something about Kandinsky's notion of realism, however, that he saw Henri Rousseau as the great champion of the movement to establish a new realism.

In my view, Kandinsky's aesthetic radicalism, encumbered though it was with a hankering for the occult, represented a genuine, but severely circumscribed, artistic achievement. If we skip ahead a few decades, to the 1940s, we find a much more contemporary—and aesthetically unproductive—response in the musings of Marcel Duchamp. In a 1946 interview with James Johnson Sweeney, Duchamp expatiates on what he called the "purgative" qualities of Dada:

Dada was an extreme protest against the physical side of painting. It was a metaphysical attitude.... It was a sort of nihilism to which I am still very sympathetic. It was a way to get out of a
state of mind—to avoid being influenced by one’s immediate environment, or by the past: to get away from clichés—to get free.

Unlike Kandinsky, Duchamp presents us not with a reinterpretation but a rejection of art. His “extreme protest against the physical side of painting” looks forward not to a purified but an obliterated art. Duchamp manipulated the accoutrements of art in an effort to destroy art and short-circuit the logic of aesthetic experience. Thus there is some irony in the fate of Duchamp’s nihilistic gestures. He lived long enough to see his bottle rack, his urinal, and the rest taken up and celebrated by the art world as just another in the seemingly endless line of aesthetic frissons. “I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge,” Duchamp noted contemptuously, “and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty.”

Should we be pleased with this state of affairs? Or, to put it another way, is the celebrity of people like Damien Hirst or Jenny Holzer a good thing for art? My answer is no. As Rochelle Gurstein observes in her recent book The Repeal of Reticence, “By now it should be obvious that there is something fraudulent, if not perverse, in the endless rehearsal of arguments that were developed to destroy nineteenth-century Victorians in a world where Victorians have long been extinct.” But the question remains: Where did we go wrong? What are we missing in the contemporary art world? Yet again, I have touched on a topic of immense complexity. But if one had to sum up volumes in a single word, a good candidate would be “beauty”: What the art world is lacking is an allegiance to beauty.

The eclipse of beauty

Now, I know that this is both vague and portentous. But surely we are in a very curious situation. Traditionally, the goal or end of fine art was to make beautiful objects. Beauty itself came with a lot of Platonic and Christian metaphysical baggage, some of it indifferent or even positively hostile to art; but art without beauty was, if not exactly a contradiction in terms, at least a description of failed art. And I might remark as an aside how often this pattern repeats itself in
contemporary life: if beauty was the traditional raison d'être of fine art, we now must have art that spurns beauty; if truth was the traditional goal of philosophy, we must now have philosophy that dispenses with truth; if ascertaining and elucidating facts was the traditional goal of historiography, we must now have history that does without facts and that resembles fiction; if procreation was the purpose of sex, we must now, according to radicals from Herbert Marcuse on down, foster a sexuality that has emancipated itself from the "tyranny of procreative eros" in order to champion what Marcuse called "polymorphous perversity." It is indeed a curious development.

But to return to art. The eclipse of beauty is not, I think, often talked about. But its absence has not gone entirely unremarked. I disagree with Peter Schjeldahl, the art critic for the Village Voice, about almost everything. But in a piece in the New York Times Magazine last fall, even Schjeldahl noted that "beauty ... has been quarantined from educated talk," and that "commerce travesties it and intellectual fashion demonizes it." His own examples of "the best art of our time"—he mentions among other delicacies photography by Cindy Sherman, a dirt-encrusted landscape by Anselm Kiefer, and the "rapturously perverse" photography of Robert Mapplethorpe—are not encouraging. He is surely right though that something has happened to beauty. But what?

At the beginning of his book on modern art, Meier-Graefe defines painting as "the art of charming the eye by colour and line" and sculpture as the art of charming "the eye by means of form in space." Now when was the last time you heard someone talk about art "charming" the eye? And yet, until quite recently, that specifically aesthetic pleasure was seen as being central to art. Thomas Aquinas defined beauty as id quod visum placet: that which being seen pleases. Still laboring in the aftermath of the avant-garde, much art today has abandoned the ambition to please the viewer aesthetically. Instead, it seeks to shock, discommode, repulse, proselytize, or startle. Beauty is out of place in any art that systematically discounts the aesthetic.

Of course, "beauty" itself is by no means an unambiguous term. In degenerate form, it can mean the merely pretty, and, in this sense, beauty really is an enemy of authentic artistic
expression. It is not hard to find examples of this sort of thing. Edmund Burke, for example, in his book on the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful, offers a list of the qualities he thinks are necessary for something to be beautiful:

First, to be comparatively small. Secondly, to be smooth. Thirdly, to have a variety in the direction of the parts; but fourthly, to have those parts not angular, but melted as it were into each other. Fifthly, to be of a delicate frame, without any remarkable appearance of strength. Sixthly, to have its colours clear and bright; but not very strong and glaring.

I hesitated to cite Burke to this jocular purpose, both because I greatly admire him as a writer and because even this early book on aesthetics contains many profound things that my quotation out of context fails to acknowledge. Still, I think it is fair to say that most of us will want to open a window after a page or two of Burke's raptures about beauty.

How different is something like Rilke's idea of beauty in the first Duino Elegy: "Beauty," he writes, "is only the beginning of a terror we can just barely endure, and what we admire is its calm disdaining to destroy us." Or think of Dostoyevsky's contention that "beauty is the battlefield on which God and the devil war for man's soul." The point is that, in its highest sense, beauty speaks with such great immediacy because it touches something deep within us. Understood in this way, beauty is something that absorbs our attention and delivers us, if but momentarily, from the poverty and incompleteness of everyday life. At its most intense, beauty invites us to forget our subjection to time and imparts an intoxicating sense of self-sufficiency. It has, as one philosopher put it, "the savor of the terrestrial paradise." This is the source of beauty's power. It both dislocates, freeing us, for a time, from our usual cares and concerns, and enraptures, seizing us with delight.

Art that loses touch with the resources of beauty is bound to be sterile. But it is also true that striving self-consciously to embody beauty is a prescription for artistic failure. This may seem paradoxical. But, like many of the most important things in life, genuine beauty is achieved mainly by indirection. In this sense, beauty resembles happiness as it was de-
scribed by Aristotle: It is not a possible goal of our actions but, rather, the natural accompaniment of actions rightly performed. Striving for happiness in life all but guarantees unhappiness; striving for beauty in art is likely to result in kitsch or some other artistic counterfeit.

The trick for artists, then, is not to lose sight of beauty but to concentrate primarily on something seemingly more pedestrian—the making of good works of art. The best guides to this task are to be found not in the work of this season's art-world darlings but in the great models furnished by the past. Although this lesson is rejected and ridiculed by the art world today, it is something that the tradition affirms again and again.

Art, religion, and politics

One example is Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses on Art*. Delivered yearly at the annual prize dinners at the Royal Academy in London, beginning in 1769, these 15 lectures contain an extraordinary amount of good advice about painting. If one had to sum up Reynolds's advice in a phrase, it would be, "Study the Old Masters." An exceptionally accomplished if somewhat predictable painter, Reynolds himself understood a great deal about the craft of painting. He knew that "a mere copyist of nature can never produce anything great" and that "there are excellences in the art of painting beyond what is commonly called the imitation of nature." But he also knew that without technical proficiency an artist is crippled. Thus he notes:

The first degree of proficiency is, in painting, what grammar is in literature, a general preparation for whatever species of art the student may afterwards choose for his more particular application. The power of drawing, modelling, and using colors is very properly called the language of art.

At the core of Reynolds's teaching is a profound insight into what we might call the enabling resources of tradition. Indeed, he sums up in a couple of sentences a cardinal truth about the relationship between tradition and creativity: "The more extensive ... your acquaintance is with the works of those who have excelled the more extensive will be your powers of
invention; and what may appear still more like a paradox, the more original will be your conceptions." There's a lot to be said for inscribing this statement on the walls of every avant-garde art classroom and art studio.

There is one further aspect of Reynolds's teaching that deserves our attention: his conception of the place of art in the larger scheme of things. In this, Reynolds was very much a man of the eighteenth century. For while he lavished meticulous attention on the purely aesthetic aspects of art, he firmly believed that an art whose ambitions were only aesthetic was deficient in some important respect. For Reynolds, art in its highest vocation had an ethical as well as an aesthetic task. The "genuine painter," he writes, must seek to do more than "amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations"; he must also "endeavor to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas."

We live at a time when art is enlisted in all manner of extra-artistic projects, from gender politics to the grim linguistic leftism of writers like Rosalind Krauss, long-time editor of the neo-Marxist journal October. Indeed, the subjugation of art and of cultural life generally to political ends has been one of the great spiritual tragedies of our age. Among much else, it has made it increasingly difficult to appreciate art on its own terms, as affording its own kinds of insights and satisfactions. This situation has made it imperative for critics who care about art to champion its distinctively aesthetic qualities against attempts to reduce art to a species of propaganda.

At the same time, however, I believe that we lose something important when our conception of art does not have room for an ethical dimension such as Reynolds urges upon us. That is to say, if politicizing the aesthetic poses a serious threat to the integrity of art, the isolation of the aesthetic from other dimensions of life represents a different sort of threat. The German art historian Hans Sedlmayr articulated this point eloquently in the 1950s. The fact is, Sedlmayr wrote:

that art cannot be assessed by a measure that is purely artistic and nothing else. Indeed such a purely artistic measure, which ignored the human element, the element which alone gives art its justification, would actually not be an artistic measure at all. It would merely be an aesthetic one, and actually the application of
purely aesthetic standards is one of the peculiarly inhuman features of the age, for it proclaims by implication the autonomy of the work of art, an autonomy that has no regard to men—the principle of "l'art pour art."

Of course, Sedlmayr was hardly alone in this sentiment. Indeed, even so "advanced" a figure as Charles Baudelaire understood that the ultimate measure of art must be extra-aesthetic. In his book *L'art romantique*, Baudelaire wrote that:

> the frenzied passion for art is a cancer that eats up everything else; and, as the out-and-out absence of what is proper and true in art is tantamount to the absence of art, the man fades away completely; excessive specialization of a faculty ends in nothing.... The folly of art is on a par with the abuse of the mind. The creation of one or the other of these two supremacies begets stupidity, hardness of heart, and unbounded pride and egotism.

Meier-Graefe made a similar point when discussing the liberation of modern art from the strictures of religion. The severing of art from religion marked an important "emancipation" for mankind, he thought; but it "entailed retrogression" for art. "Art was to be free," Meier-Graefe wrote, "but free from what? The innovators forgot, that freedom implies isolation. In her impulsive vehemence, art cast away the elements that made her indispensable to man."

**Modern idolatry**

What is it that makes art "indispensable," as Meier-Graefe put it? That makes art more than "the diversion of an idle moment"? One needn't subscribe to the didactic philosophy of Reynolds and his "grandeur of ideas" to see that a purely aesthetic conception of art is a spiritually constricting conception of art. By the nineteenth century, art had long been free from serving the ideological needs of religion; and yet, the spiritual crisis of the age tended to invest art with ever greater existential burdens—burdens that continue, in various ways, to be felt down to this day. The poet Wallace Stevens articulated one important strand of this phenomenon when he observed that, "in the absence of a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."

The idea that poetry—that art generally—should serve as a
source—perhaps the primary source—of spiritual sustenance in a secular age is a Romantic notion that continues to resonate powerfully. It helps to explain, for example, the special aura that attaches to art and artists, even now—even, that is, at a time when poseurs like Serrano and Bruce Nauman and Holly Hughes are accounted artists by persons one might otherwise have had reason to think were serious people.

This Romantic inheritance has also figured, with various permutations (not to say perversions) in much avant-garde culture. We have come a long way since Dostoyevsky could declare, “Incredible as it may seem, the day will come when man will quarrel more fiercely about art than about God.” Whether that trek has described a journey of progress is perhaps an open question. It is no secret that Dostoyevsky thought it a disaster all around, for mankind as well as for art. This much, I think, is clear: Without an allegiance to beauty, art degenerates into a caricature of itself; it is beauty that animates aesthetic experience, making it so seductive; but aesthetic experience itself degenerates into a kind of fetish or idol if it is held up as an end in itself, untested by the rest of life.
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